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A 'garbage' find is making history

By Roger Boye

NEARLY 25 YEARS AGO, two amateur archeologists decided to dig into the ruins of a prehistoric "garbage dump" along the rugged Maine coast at Blue Hill Bay.

They soon began finding stone tools and other ancient artifacts, proof that man had lived at the site as early as 4000 B.C. But much more significantly, they also discovered a dirty, dime-sized coin buried 12 inches below the surface in bone and shell rubble.

Today, several scholars are convinced the coin is an authentic, 900-year-old Norwegian penny, possible evidence that Norsemen (explorers from Norway) visited what is now the United States 400 years before the voyages of Columbus.

"At last, a Norse artifact has been found below the 49th Parallel - a metal object that can be reasonably closely dated, even if the date of the deposit at the site in Maine must be somewhat less certain," wrote Peter Seaby, a prominent London numismatist, in the Coin and Medal Bulletin.

Experts such as Seaby believe the penny was minted in about 1080, during the reign of Norwegian king Olaf the Quiet (Olaf III Kyrre). No letters or inscriptions appear on the coin, but the obverse depicts the head of an animal with an open mouth and pointed ears, and the reverse shows a cross inside a circle.

Two amateur archeologists found the penny in 1957, but apparently did not realize it was from Norway. Subsequently, the men gave the Maine State Museum in Augusta more than 20,000 artifacts--including the coin--which they had uncovered at Blue Hill Bay during 22 summer digs.

"It was a huge pile of stuff, and we didn't know at first that something very significant would be in there," said museum director Paul Rivard, whose staff is cataloguing the prehistoric tools and other items. The Norse coin, the only medieval artifact in the hoard, is probably the oldest European object ever found at an archeological site in the U.S.

Meanwhile, the "coin find of the decade" has excited many coin scholars and other experts, including Dr. Marshall McKusick, who is writing a book about medieval explorers.

"My first appraisal was that the coin represented a hoax, the most recent of many which have plagued and embarrassed those seeking to find the trail of the Norse explorers in America," the University of Iowa anthropologist wrote in a World Coin News article.

McKusick noted that all supposedly rare artifacts of Viking-era exploration found in the U.S.--including the legendary Kensington stone in Minnesota--have proved to be frauds. Nevertheless, after examining the Norse penny evidence, McKusick now agrees with the numismatic experts.

"If the coin is genuine, as I think it is, we must work backwards to determine how it got to Maine," he said in a telephone interview. In other words, did a Norwegian explorer drop the coin as he walked along the Maine coast in the 11th or 12th centuries? Or did a modern-day hoaxster bury the coin in Maine to trick the experts?

Scholars know that a few Norse explorers (sometimes dubbed Vikings) lived in Iceland and Greenland during the 11th Century.

Apparently, the Norse explorers used barter, not coins, when they traded among themselves or with the Eskimos or Indians. However, experts theorize, some Norwegian explorers may have used pennies minted during the reign of Olaf the Quiet as jewelry or ornaments.

Thus, it is possible that a Norseman could have traveled as far south as Maine to hunt seal or other food and lost the coin. Or, perhaps, the coin was taken to Maine by an Indian who had obtained it in trade in northern Newfoundland.